

August 2020

## Multiculturalism as a way to religious tolerance

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### Recommended Citation

Baghirli, Aydan; Yusifova, Zahira; Fataliyeva, Fatima; Valiyev, Elvin; and Malik-Aslanov, Murad (2020) "Multiculturalism as a way to religious tolerance," *Undergraduate Journal of Global Citizenship*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/jogc/vol3/iss2/5>

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## Multiculturalism as a way to religious tolerance

### Cover Page Footnote

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to our Writing and Information Literacy Instructor, Dr. Tamilla Mammadova who inspired us to write this paper and gave her precious feedback.

## MULTICULTURALISM AS A WAY TO RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

### 1. Introduction:

Religion in its core has existed side by side with human beings for thousands of years shifting its shape and form along the way. Started by the caveman societies using deities and supernatural powers to explain basic characteristics of nature, this kind of mindset provided comfort and motivation for early humans to continue discovering and researching their surroundings. Gradually, beliefs in supernatural became more complex throughout the years, with deities encompassing every single action and aspect of life, with Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece serving as prime examples of this shift. At this point, with Abrahamic religions being the predominant belief systems in the world, where one deity is the source and cause of everything, intolerance to other religions decreased steadily up to modern times. This, however, does not mean that discrimination and prejudice have totally vanished from the societies. While the Dark Ages with the Crusades and the Inquisitions around the globe are long gone, people identified by their religion and often belonging to a religious minority groups in a specific country face hardships and barriers in various parts of their lives. Even in communities with self-proclaimed “progressive” views on the modern world, this kind of persecution still runs rampant. But in a world plagued with discrimination toward religious minorities, are there any countries capable of setting an admirable example to the rest? Those kinds of countries do exist, and all of them follow a similar pattern.

Thus, the goal of this paper is to discuss the existing cases of religious oppression around the world emphasizing Azerbaijan as a role model country to tackle with religious intolerance and presenting multiculturalism as the best way to inculcate mutual respect and forbearance between people. To do so, we will review a number of relevant case studies underlining those that target on

minimization of religious persecution, intolerance and disrespect. All in all, this review paper gives count to the existing problems around the globe followed up by the representation of Azerbaijani multicultural commitment as a role model in fostering peace and love among people of various nations and religions living in this country. The paper is accompanied by the due references and terminates with some concluding remarks.

## **2. Literature Review:**

### **2.1. The concept of Multiculturalism and Religious Tolerance Globally**

In the contemporary society as an aftermath of the globalization, the idea of multiculturalism is widely practiced in many countries. According to Kaya (2013:313), nowadays, violence and racism are excluded from the gentrification of society; as a result, multiculturalism stands for an ability to integrate cultures, minority groups, races, and ethnicities within the borders of any country without sacrificing the original identity. Multiculturalism in its prime was observed during the centuries of the Ottoman Empire (Kaya, 2013:299). Ottoman multiculturalism strongly intertwined with the word “tolerance”, which, for instance, is and continues to be a solid part of Turkish history, starting from the early days of the Ottoman Empire. That kind of multiculturalism managed to positively affect economic, social and political issues. However, multiculturalism has its own share of opponents. West (2005:151) believes that “multiculturalism is perceived as the greatest safeguard against cultural conformity that leads to racism, fascism, and totalitarianism.” In addition, the propaganda of multiculturalism is used by many international organizations including EU. According to Kaya (2013:309), the perspective of EU was discussed during a summit in December of 1999 and completely changed the political viewpoints in Turkey, opening up new religious perspectives on social, ethnic and political rights. For instance, Kurds, Islamists, Armenians and a number of religious and ethnic groups in Turkey have become supporters of EU,

seeing the European Union as the beacon of political stability and peace. In addition to multiculturalism, tolerance is something that we should strive and fight for (West, 2005:152). Tolerance is sometimes called a “Soft Multiculturalism”, where minorities should not face unfair discrimination and people of different cultures and customs should be tolerated and treated on a level playing field.

The modern progressive world, however, did not manage to achieve the level of tolerance needed to eliminate discrimination, with numbers of countries speaking for themselves. Although religious majorities enjoy high levels of acceptability in their respective regions, religious minorities still suffer from persecution. According to the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), a biannually conducted public survey where Australian locals were asked to specify the level of a social distance, they would prefer members of certain religious groups, Muslims and Jehovah’s Witnesses, were ranked the lowest on the list (Bouma, 2012:52). While the Witnesses were considered to be “Australians with an undesirable religion”, Muslims were treated simply as “undesirable immigrants”, both grouped in the category named “Keep out of Australia”. Due to Australia being a predominantly Christian country, Greek Orthodox, Anglican, and Presbyterian were widely accepted within the society (Bouma, 2012:53).

Discrimination of the minority carries within itself numerous consequences that impact governmental decisions. In the United States, for example, based on 1986 CBS/New York Times Immigration Poll, persecuted and historically oppressed religious denominations have a higher tendency to support mass immigration, also a disadvantaged minority, with Jews being the strongest supporters (Fetzer, 1998:44). Non-religious communities were also involved in the poll, with atheists and agnostics holding pro-immigrant stances. A similar poll was conducted in 1988 in France and Germany, called Euro-Barometer 30, using random sampling. The results were no

different from the results of the 1986 poll, with non-Catholics more likely to accept immigrants. On a 4-point scale, not belonging to the Catholic denomination increases the tolerance to migrants by .610 points (Fetzer, 1998:46). That is, governments and citizens shape their countries, and all of the examples above explicitly demonstrate that.

Lester and Roberts (2006:334) consider that “religious tolerance requires the establishment of an environment where believers are able to feel comfortable expressing their religious identity.” However, in the modern world, it is not so difficult to come across nations that show intolerant and disrespectful attitude toward the religious minorities since, typically, people in such communities consider their beliefs as a correct religious approach and force members of religious minorities to accept their “true” religion (Nussbaum, 2004:44). As an illustration, in one of the biggest Eastern countries India, the members of Hindu right-wing parties in their speeches constantly emphasized that all minorities, including religious minorities, must become a part of Hindu culture (Nussbaum, 2004:44). Therefore, they coerced people to accept their ideology. Even, in 2002, hundreds of Muslims who were considered as a religious minority, were killed by Hindus in Gujarat state with the help of the police and some public officials (Nussbaum, 2004:44). This case is the most extreme form of religious intolerance that, unfortunately, resulted in the brutal murder of innocent people whose fault was merely their religious affiliation. Besides, statistics and records indicate that religious intolerance exists not only in the Eastern countries but also in many developed countries. In fact, it is terribly disappointing that religious intolerance of local people which is a flagrant violation of human rights is frequently encountered in the freedom of choice defender and supporter countries. As a result, all of these cases serve as a prove of the degree of religious intolerance demonstrated by governments and people even in the biggest and the most powerful countries around the world.

## **2.2. The attitude of Azerbaijan toward Religious Minorities**

An aspect that makes a country multicultural is its geographical location; Azerbaijan, which is located in intersection of various cultures and civilizations, is one of these countries with multicultural population including such ethnic diversities as Udins, Ingiloy, Krizes, Hilalugs, Budugs, Tats, Talishs, Lezghins; immigrant diversities, i.e. Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Kurds, Jews, Greeks, Assyrians, Germans, Tatars and finally, religious diversities, i.e. Sunnis, Shias, Christians, and Jewish living all together and enjoying their rights and traditions. Fortunately, the concept of multiculturalism as well as religious tolerance and respect are strongly supported by the current government which has been selected by the local people. Today, government's proper interferences have more important impact on the integration of ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities within the country (Mehdiyev *et al.*, 2017:362). While many governments do not allot money, which is accessible to advance religions, Azerbaijani government policy has always satisfied the cultural and religious needs of its citizens without any distinctions (Kunina, 2011). Moreover, according to national policy, the Constitution of Azerbaijan ensures equal rights and opportunities to representatives of different nations in various work spheres. As to Kunina (2011), Milli Majlis, a national assembly of Azerbaijan, consists of representatives of different ethnic diversities such as Russians, Lezghins, Kurds, Tats, Talishs and others. Consequently, delegates of the minority groups noticeably contribute to the development of the country. In his speech, the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev always points out that the "traditions of multiculturalism have always existed in Azerbaijan for centuries indeed, merely, it has been differently called, but the essence hasn't changed" (Mehdiyev *et al.*, 2017:362). The idea of multiculturalism in this country is strongly supported by the population. It is not random that decisions of a government about such crucial issues are successfully implemented; normally, they

are implemented only when they get approval from the locals (Mehdiyev *et al.*, 2017:496). The decree of the President of Azerbaijan “On the Protection of the Rights and Freedoms and on the State Support for the Promotion of the Languages and Cultures of National Minorities, Smaller Peoples and Ethnic Groups Living in the Republic of Azerbaijan” was likewise implemented as the state document dedicated to the national policy of the Azerbaijan Republic. A special department for national minorities was established in the president apparatus, and it reminds the structure of Milli Majlis (Kunina, 2011). Youth for Alliance of Civilization (YAOC) that is a youth dimension of the United Nation’s Alliance of Civilization (UN AOC) was initiated in 2007 (Ahmadov, 2011). The main goal of this project was to gather 45 young leaders who represent various cultures and religions to participate in the process of solving conflicts created by religious and cultural phobias. According to Ahmadov (2011), this movement was established with the purpose to raise awareness in young people about the cooperation against misunderstanding, misconception and extremism due to the fact that they are considered to be more undefended to negative ideological trends. Moreover, Global Youth Movement for AOC (GYMAOC) was founded to institutionalize this movement in April 2011 in Baku (Ahmadov, 2011). According to the President Ilham Aliyev, one of main goals of Azerbaijan is to enable everyone to benefit from financial development, growth of oil industry, equal rights and choice of any belief (Mehdiyev *et al.*, 2017:366). The existence of Russian community within Azerbaijan gives opportunity for the Russians to read newspaper, to watch TV channels, and to receive education in their native language. People can get education in the Russian language not only at schools, but also at higher educational institutions almost all over the state (Mehdiyev *et al.*, 2017:379-380). Ukrainian language is likewise respected and used by the Ukrainian faculty that operates at Baku Slavic University (Mehdiyev *et al.*, 2017:368).

As we previously mentioned, people can choose their beliefs without any restrictions by Azerbaijani government; consequently, many places of worship such as Orthodox and Catholic churches and Jewish synagogues are as equally valued as mosques in the country. For example, Holy Myrrhbearers Cathedral built in Baku in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by philanthropist Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev was reconstructed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by another Azerbaijani benefactor. Moreover, the government did not confine itself to just giving oral support to religious minorities but realized it with its actions. For instance, one of the oldest churches in the Caucasian region – the Church of Caucasian Albania has been restored and provided its use for Christians with the command of the President (Mehdiyev *et al.*, 2017:496). Catholic church, blessed by pontiff Iohanne Pavel, was rebuilt by preserving traditions of the previous one (Kunina, 2011). One of the ethnic and religious minorities living in Azerbaijan throughout the history are the Jewish. During the recent years, Azerbaijani government together with the Muslim community reconstructed an extant Jewish Synagogue. Another peculiarity that makes Azerbaijan different from other countries is preservation of a place called “Red village” where Jews have lived for the longest period of time in one area. Neither the government nor local people interfere in the lives, traditions and religious practices of Jews in the country. For instance, in the streets of Azerbaijan, people can freely wear kippah, which is a Jewish male head covering. Moreover, such religious events as Shabbat and Torah dedication ceremony (the Holy book in Judaism) are held without any prejudices by Azerbaijani nation. In his press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the President Aliyev underlined that there were seven synagogues and five Jewish schools in Baku such as Chabad Ohr Avner inaugurated in 2010 (Mehdiyev *et al.*, 2017:504). Before that, Azerbaijani government had never allowed opening educational institutions for pious minority groups due to the fear of radical religious ideologies. Ignoring this risk, the former leader of

Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev, who always placed a great emphasis on education and minority groups of the country, initiated establishment of the Jewish school in 2003. His move is respected and blessed by many Jewish people and leaders. Moreover, according to Jewish Telegraphic Agency (Krichevsky, 2003), executive director of the Federation of Jewish Communities Avraham Berkowitz commented on Aliyev's humanitarian action toward Jews in the following way: "It is important that in the current international situation, the leader of a Muslim country can stand up to protect the rights of its minority."

A strong support for religious minorities by Azerbaijanis exists not only inside the country but also outside it. According to *Georgian Today* newspaper, a memorandum was signed between Azerbaijan and Georgia so that the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic would provide free gas for churches and monasteries in Georgia in 2014 (socar.ge, 2014).

Today we can observe a certain number of schools and other educational institutions open for religious minorities where people do not only get education in their mother tongue but are allowed to celebrate and commemorate all important dates and days according to their nationalities and confessions. For instance, Bashkir, Idel-Uralian, and Tatar nations of the country can celebrate a Sabantuy holiday every June 23 in a large extent. Yet, this all does not detach religious minorities from the mainstream country events and holidays.

One of the controversial issues regarding the religious majority is a division of Islam into Shia and Sunni branches. The majority of people living in Azerbaijan are followers of Islam, which was divided into two groups such as Shia and Sunni. The division arose when the community was deciding who would replace the Prophet Mohammad when he died. Various features of these two groups triggered development of different systems of law and theology (Harvard University, 2016). 63% of 43 countries have an official state religion named Sunni Islam, Shia Islam or just

Islam (Pew Research Center, 2017). According to Abdo *et al.* (2016), the majority of Shias are rooted in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain, with its plurality in Lebanon; whereas Sunnis compose majority in more than forty countries from Morocco to Indonesia. Today, ancient religious split has caused to increase conflicts in the Middle East and Muslim countries (Abdo *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, Muslims from these two groups have lived in Azerbaijan side by side without any struggle and problem for hundreds of years. Also, Sunnis and Shias can marry each other and pray at the same mosques. As Abdo *et al.* (2016) say, “They share faith in the Quran and the Prophet Mohammed’s sayings and perform similar prayers, although they differ in rituals and interpretation of Islamic law.” Despite the fact that 85% of Azerbaijani Muslim population are members of Shia sect (World Population Review, 2018), any discriminations and conflicts between these two religious groups cannot be observed within the country. One of the reasons for people’s positive attitude toward religious freedom is that only 21% of Azerbaijanis believe that religion plays an essential role in their lives. Due to this low percentage of pious people, Azerbaijan is considered as one of the least religious (secular) countries in the world (World Population Review, 2018). As earlier indicated by Abdo *et al.* (2016) those members of Sunnis and Shias have peacefully lived in several countries throughout the centuries, and it can be implied that Azerbaijan is on par with these countries. Thus, all these mentioned examples once again prove that Azerbaijan in a multicultural country and is capable of sharing its experience with other countries to fight persecutions and discriminations in the world.

### **3. Conclusion**

Absolute tolerance to every single individual, regardless of his/her ethnicity and obtained identity, is a utopian fantasy that can never be achieved due to a human nature at its core but achieving the best possible level of tolerance is a manageable task. Azerbaijan, with its rich and colorful history

and experience of true discrimination at a time, has committed itself to reach that kind of level, and is on the right route. Mutual respect, tolerance and mutual understanding continually reign in the country. The practice demonstrates that countries with religious tolerance and multicultural approach are capable of going ahead of many other countries, even developed ones, where the governments and people give way to hate, aggression, oppression, disrespect and intolerance toward religious minorities. Usually, countries and its representatives claim to stand for tolerance and open-mindedness, but it is rare when a country delivers on that promise, but if Azerbaijan and other countries guided by multiculturalism continue setting an example and become the frontrunners for religious tolerance, that trend of false promises will eventually decline. Many developed countries claim to be the bedrock of democracy and tolerance to people of all identities, but without basic equal treatment to all religious denominations, that original claim is worth the fraction of its actual meaning. Countries worldwide should dedicate their time to thoroughly analyze and come up with adequate solutions to religious intolerance issues.

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